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When school's out in Napa, AmeriCorps volunteers step in

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Raphael Kluzniok/Register

Esmerelda counts buttons as part of a math game, while Evelyn, left, and Emely, right, look on during Josie Santoyo's tutoring session at Shearer Elementary in Napa last week.

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For nearly 4,000 county elementary and middle school students, education doesn't stop with the ringing of the final classroom bell. Instead, tutoring, sports and after-school activities take over the classrooms and schoolyards – often with volunteers in the lead.

On a recent Wednesday – when Napa public schools let out earlier than on other days – the fields outside Shearer Elementary School filled with children at mid-afternoon. As dozens of pupils lined up for supervised games of soccer and indoor ball hockey, others sat in on a local chef's cooking demonstration showcasing fresh

Information

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vegetables – while still others receive tutoring and extra classes to keep up academically with their schoolmates.

What those diverse activities have in common is a cadre of helpers from AmeriCorps, the national public service agency that has one of its largest schoolhouse presences in the state in the Napa Valley. As volunteers with the group work with pupils inside and outside the classroom, their goal is to use the hours beyond the school day to ensure children are fully supported.

"It's like a privilege," said Yesenia Sandoval-Chavira, a 12-year AmeriCorps member who oversees AmeriCorps-staffed programs at 10 Napa County schools. "They feel honored they're getting this (extra) instruction, they're getting a teacher who's picking them up."

AmeriCorps is a branch of the Corporation for National and Community Service, a federal agency established in 1993 as an outlet for volunteers to aid schools, service agencies and community groups.

At local schools in Napa, St. Helena and Calistoga, volunteers recruited through AmeriCorps run after-school support services and offer additional instruction – often in partnership with staff teachers – mainly for children from low-income families or those needing academic help. Volunteers work with the Napa County Office of Education to operate a range of programs, which cover needs from physical fitness and nutrition to literacy, math and science instruction.

Of the roughly 250 AmeriCorps volunteers and staff members working at California schools, 60 are based in Napa County, according to Sara Sitch, assistant director of the CalSERVES after-school programs, which the Napa County Office of Education operates with AmeriCorps assistance.

The number of Shearer students receiving such after-school support has steadily grown since AmeriCorps' local arrival in 1998 – but perhaps never as quickly as now, according to Briana Downey, the group's local senior manager for expanded learning. In the past year, she added, the waiting list for Shearer's after-school programs has grown from 83 to 125.

"The tutoring, the one-to-one attention, it wouldn't happen otherwise," said Sitch.

At a low half-circle of a table in a Shearer classroom last week, three girls and a boy had the full and simultaneous attention of Josie Santoyo, a recent Dominican University of California graduate and AmeriCorps volunteer giving the pupils an extra half-hour of math instruction.

"I think I'm gonna get it!" Evelyn Salina said with a smile as their teacher raised a flash card marked "120—___ = 122."

"I know it!" replied RJ Yadao. "Me too," added Emely Meza.

In place of textbooks, Santoyo led her mini-class in rhythmic counting up to 100, then helped her charges turn arithmetic into a board game-like gambit. After sliding buttons off cardboard snowman cutouts to grasp subtraction problems, the children added numbers to reach 100 by rolling giant, fist-size dice their teacher had crafted from jewelry boxes.

"They weren't really familiar with their numbers yet – I had to start with them almost as if they were kindergarten-level," Santoyo said after her class wrapped up. "Now they count to 100, and some of them want to count past that. Just the small-group support is really helpful to them."

"I've always had a passion for kids, and I wanted to give back to the community," said Santoyo, who is assisting the Shearer faculty while pursuing a teaching credential. "The students, they make my day. Every day that they say hi, they're the reason I want to come in."

The extra attention at volunteer hands can be a godsend for students with working parents unable to give their full attention, or for those struggling to keep up in their classes, according to Aoi O'Brien, a second-grade teacher at Shearer.

While most of Shearer's classes hold a manageable 20 or so pupils, "other schools can have 27, 30, even 35 kids, and it's very difficult to give the same amount of time to each child," she said.

"Sometimes, you need that extra five, 10 minutes of intervention – and it's like having a big buddy, because often these (volunteer) teachers are younger."


For the most enthusiastic of AmeriCorps helpers, said Sitch, volunteering can become a springboard to a career of teaching, community work or both.

"One thing that's been empowering is, you can really shape a young person's life," she said. "I don't know that I'd have chosen the path I did without the experiences I've had."

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